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## DOCUMENTS

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### BENJAMIN FRANKLIN AND FREEDOM

Of the fathers of the republic who first saw the evils of slavery, none made a more forceful argument against the institution than Benjamin Franklin. A man of lowly estate himself, he could not sympathize with the man who felt that his bread should be wrung from the sweat of another's brow. Desiring to see the institution abolished, Franklin early connected himself with the anti-slavery forces of Pennsylvania and maintained this attitude of antagonism toward it until his death. His printing press was placed at the disposal of the pamphleteers who by their method endeavored to influence public opinion, and as a means of effecting the liberation of the blacks he cooperated with others in educating them as a preparation for citizenship.

His first effort to promote the education of the Negroes was the assistance he gave the work established by Dr. Thomas Bray, who passed a large part of his life in performing deeds of benevolence and charity. This philanthropist became acquainted at the Hague with M. D'Allone, who approved and promoted his schemes. M. D'Allone, during his lifetime, gave to Dr. Bray a considerable sum of money, which was to be applied to the conversion of Negroes in America. At his death he left an additional sum of nine hundred pounds for the same object. Dr. Bray formed an association for the management and proper disposal of these funds. He died in 1730, and the same trust continued to be executed by a company of gentlemen, called "Dr. Bray's Associates." Franklin was for several years one of these workers.

Writing about this work, he said to a friend:

I have not yet seen Mr. Beatty, nor do I know where to write to him. He forwarded your letter to me from Ireland. The para-

graph of your letter, inserted in the papers, related to the negro school. I gave it to the gentlemen concerned, as it was a testimony in favor of their pious design. But I did not expect they would print it with your name. They have since chosen me one of the Society, and I am at present chairman for the current year. I enclose you an account of their proceedings.<sup>1</sup>

Franklin's argument against slavery was economic as well as moral. He said:

It is an ill-grounded opinion that, by the labor of slaves, America may possibly vie in cheapness of manufactures with Britain. The labor of slaves can never be so cheap here as the labor of working men is in Britain. Any one may compute it. Interest of money is in the colonies from six to ten per cent. Slaves, one with another, cost thirty pounds sterling per head. Reckon then the interest of the first purchase of a slave, the insurance or risk on his life, his clothing and diet, expenses in his sickness and loss of time, loss by his neglect of business (neglect is natural to the man who is not to be benefited by his own care or diligence), expense of a driver to keep him at work, and his pilfering from time to time, almost every slave being by nature a thief, and compare the whole amount with the wages of a manufacturer of iron or wool in England, you will see that labor is much cheaper there than it ever can be by Negroes here. Why then will Americans purchase slaves? Because slaves may be kept as long as a man pleases, or has occasion for their labor; while hired men are continually leaving their masters (often in the midst of his business and setting up for themselves).<sup>2</sup>

The Negroes brought into the English sugar islands have greatly diminished the whites there; the poor are, by this means, deprived of employment, while a few families acquire vast estates, which they spend on foreign luxuries, and educating their children in the habit of those luxuries; the same income is needed for the support of one that might have maintained one hundred. The whites who have slaves, not laboring, are enfeebled, and therefore not so generally prolific; the slaves being worked too hard, and ill fed, their constitutions are broken and the deaths among them are more than the births; so that a continual supply is needed from Africa. The northern colonies, having few slaves, increase in whites. Slaves also

<sup>1</sup> *The Works of Benjamin Franklin, Correspondence*, VII, pp. 201-202.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 314.

pejorate the families that use them; the white children become proud, disgusted with labor, and, being educated in idleness, are rendered unfit to get a living by industry.<sup>3</sup>

As the following letter indicates, Franklin was in close touch with one of the most ardent anti-slavery men of his day, Anthony Benezet, whose pamphlets he often published:

LONDON, 22 August, 1772.

*Dear Friend,*

I made a little extract from yours of April 27th, of the number of slaves imported and perishing, with some close remarks on the hypocrisy of this country, which encourages such a detestable commerce by laws for promoting the Guinea trade; while it piqued itself on its virtue, love of liberty, and the equity of its courts, in setting free a single Negro. This was inserted in the *London Chronicle*, of the 20th of June last.

I thank you for the Virginia address, which I shall also publish with some remarks. I am glad to hear that the disposition against keeping Negroes grows more general in North America. Several pieces have been lately printed here against the practice, and I hope in time it will be taken into consideration and suppressed by the legislature. Your labors have already been attended with great effects. I hope, therefore, you and your friends will be encouraged to proceed. My hearty wishes of success attend you, being ever, my dear friend, yours affectionately,

B. FRANKLIN.<sup>4</sup>

The same sentiments of Franklin are expressed in the following letter to Dean Woodward in 1773:

LONDON, 10 April, 1773.

*Reverend Sir,*

Desirous of being revived in your memory, I take this opportunity, by my good friend Mrs. Blacker, of sending you a printed piece, and a manuscript, both on a subject you and I frequently conversed upon with concurring sentiments, when I had the pleasure of seeing you in Dublin. I have since had the satisfaction to

<sup>3</sup> *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, II, p. 316.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, pp. 16-17.

learn, that a disposition to abolish slavery prevails in North America, that many of the Pennsylvanians have set their slaves at liberty, and that even the Virginia Assembly have petitioned the King for permission to make a law for preventing the importation of more into that colony. This request, however, will probably not be granted, as their former laws of that kind have always been repealed, and as the interest of a few merchants here has more weight with government than that of thousands at a distance.<sup>5</sup>

The following letter from Richard Price attests Franklin's interest and efforts in behalf of the slaves:

HACKNEY, 26 September, 1787.

*My dear Friend,*

I am very happy when I think of the encouragement which you have given me to address you under this appellation. Your *friendship* I reckon indeed one of the distinctions of my life. I frequently receive great pleasure from the accounts of you, which Dr. Rush and Mr. Vaughan send me. But I receive much greater pleasure from seeing your own hand.

I have lately been favored with two letters, which have given me this pleasure, the last of which acquaints me, that my name has been added to the number of the corresponding members of the Pennsylvania Society for Abolishing Negro Slavery, of which you are president, and also brought me a pamphlet containing the constitution and the laws of Pennsylvania, which relate to the object of the Society. I hope that you and the Society will accept my thanks, and believe that I am truly sensible of the honor done me. As for any services I can do, they are indeed but small; for I find, that, far from possessing, in the decline of life, your vigor of body and mind, every kind of business is becoming more and more an incumbrance to me. At the same time, the calls of business increase upon me, as you will learn in some measure from the Report at the end of the Discourse, which you will receive with this letter.

A similar institution to yours, for abolishing Negro slavery, is just formed in London, and I have been desired to make one of the acting committee, but I have begged to be excused. I have sent you some of their papers. I need not say how earnestly I wish success to such institutions. Something, perhaps, will be done with this view by the convention of delegates. This convention, consist-

<sup>5</sup> *Works of Benjamin Franklin*, VIII, p. 42.

ing of many of the first men, in respect of wisdom and influence, in the United States, must be a most august and venerable assembly. May God guide their deliberations. The happiness of the world depends, in some degree, on the result. I am waiting with patience for an account of it.<sup>6</sup>

At the instigation of Franklin, the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully held in Bondage<sup>7</sup> published this address:

It is with peculiar satisfaction we assure the friends of humanity, that, in prosecuting the design of our association, our endeavours have proved successful, far beyond our most sanguine expectations.

Encouraged by this success, and by the daily progress of that luminous and benign spirit of liberty, which is diffusing itself throughout the world, and humbly hoping for the continuance of the divine blessing on our labors, we have ventured to make an important addition to our original plan, and do therefore earnestly solicit the support and assistance of all who can feel the tender emotions of sympathy and compassion or relish the exalted pleasure of beneficence.

Slavery is such an atrocious debasement of human nature, that its very extirpation, if not performed with solicitous care, may sometimes open a source of serious evils.

The unhappy man, who has long been treated as a brute animal, too frequently sinks beneath the common standard of the human species. The galling chains, that bind his body, do also fetter his intellectual faculties, and impair the social affections of his heart. Accustomed to move like a mere machine, by the will of a master, reflection is suspended; he has not the power of choice; and reason and conscience have but little influence over his conduct, because he is chiefly governed by the passion of fear. He is poor and friendless; perhaps worn out by extreme labor, age, and disease.

Under such circumstances, freedom may often prove a misfortune to himself, and prejudicial to society.

Attention to emancipated black people, it is therefore to be hoped,

<sup>6</sup> *Works of Benjamin Franklin*, X, p. 320.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 515.

will become a branch of our national policy; but, as far as we contribute to promote this emancipation, so far that attention is evidently a serious duty incumbent on us, and which we mean to discharge to the best of our judgment and abilities.

To instruct, to advise, to qualify those, who have been restored to freedom, for the exercise and enjoyment of civil liberty, to promote in them habits of industry, to furnish them with employments suited to their age, sex, talents, and other circumstances, and to procure their children an education calculated for their future situation in life; these are the great outlines of the annexed plan, which we have adopted, and which we conceive will essentially promote the public good, and the happiness of these our hitherto too much neglected fellow-creatures.

A plan so extensive cannot be carried into execution without considerable pecuniary resources, beyond the present ordinary funds of the Society. We hope much from the generosity of enlightened and benevolent freemen, and will gratefully receive any donations or subscriptions for this purpose, which may be made to our treasurer, James Starr, or to James Pemberton, chairman of our committee of correspondence.

Signed, by order of the Society,

B. FRANKLIN, *President*.

Philadelphia, 9th of November, 1789.

Writing to John Wright in London in 1789, Franklin showed that he never neglected the movement to abolish the slave trade:

PHILADELPHIA, 4 November, 1789.

I wish success to your endeavours for obtaining an abolition of the Slave Trade. The epistle from your Yearly Meeting, for the year 1768, was not the *first sowing* of the good seed you mention; for I find by an old pamphlet in my possession, that George Keith, near a hundred years since, wrote a paper against the practice, said to be "given forth by the appointment of the meeting held by him, at Phillip James's house, in the city of Philadelphia, about the year 1693"; wherein a strict charge was given to Friends, "that they should set their Negroes at liberty, after some reasonable time of service, &c., &c." And about the year 1728, or 1729, I myself printed a book for Ralph Sandyford, another of your Friends in this city, against keeping Negroes in slavery, two edi-

tions of which he distributed gratis. And about the year 1736 I printed another book on the same subject for Benjamin Lay, who also professed being one of your Friends, and he distributed the books chiefly among them. By these instances it appears, that the seed was indeed sown in the good ground of your profession, though much earlier than the time you mention, and its springing up to effect at last, though so late, is some confirmation of Lord Bacon's observation, that *a good motion never dies*; and it may encourage us in making such, though hopeless of their taking immediate effect.<sup>s</sup>

### ON THE SLAVE TRADE

“Dr. Franklin's name, as President of the Abolition Society, was signed to the memorial presented to the House of Representatives of the United States, on the 12th of February, 1789, praying them to exert the full extent of power vested in them by the Constitution, in discouraging the traffic of the human species. This was his last public act. In the debates to which this memorial gave rise, several attempts were made to justify the trade. In the *Federal Gazette* of March 25th, 1790, there appeared an essay, signed Historicus, written by Dr. Franklin, in which he communicated a Speech, said to have been delivered in the Divan of Algiers, in 1687, in opposition to the prayer of the petition of a sect called *Erika*, or Purists, for the abolition of piracy and slavery. This pretended African speech was an excellent parody of one delivered by Mr. Jackson, of Georgia. All the arguments urged in favor of Negro slavery are applied with equal force to justify the plundering and enslaving of Europeans. It affords, at the same time, a demonstration of the futility of the arguments in defense of the slave-trade, and of the strength of mind and ingenuity of the author, at his advanced period of life. It furnishes, too, a no less convincing proof of his power of imitating the style of other times and nations, than his celebrated *Parable against Persecution*. And as the latter led many persons to search the Scriptures with a view to find it, so the former caused many persons to search the book-

<sup>s</sup> *Works of Benjamin Franklin*, X, p. 403.



stores and libraries for the work from which it was said to be extracted."—Dr. Stuber.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE FEDERAL GAZETTE.<sup>1</sup>

March 23d, 1790.

*Sir,*

Reading last night in your excellent paper the speech of Mr. Jackson in Congress against their meddling with the affair of slavery, or attempting to mend the condition of the slaves, it put me in mind of a similar one made about one hundred years since by Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim, a member of the Divan of Algiers, which may be seen in Martin's Account of his Consulship, anno 1687. It was against granting the petition of the sect called *Erika*, or Purists, who prayed for the abolition of piracy and slavery as being unjust. Mr. Jackson does not quote it; perhaps he has not seen it. If, therefore, some of its reasonings are to be found in his eloquent speech, it may only show that men's interests and intellects operate and are operated on with surprising similarity in all countries and climates, whenever they are under similar circumstances. The African's speech, as translated, is as follows:

"Allah Bismillah, &c. God is great, and Mahomet is his Prophet.

"Have these *Erika* considered the consequences of granting their petition? If we cease our cruises against the Christians, how shall we be furnished with the commodities their countries produce, and which are so necessary for us? If we forbear to make slaves of their people, who in this hot climate are to cultivate our lands? Who are to perform the common labors of our city, and in our families? Must we not then be our own slaves? And is there not more compassion and more favor due to us as Mussulmen, than to these Christian dogs? We have now above fifty thousand slaves in and near Algiers. This number, if not kept up by fresh supplies, will soon diminish, and be gradually annihilated. If we then cease taking and plundering the infidel ships, and making slaves of the seamen and passengers, our lands will become of no value for want of cultivation; the rents of houses in the city will sink one half; and the revenue of government arising from its share of prizes be totally destroyed! And for what? To gratify the whims of a whimsical sect, who would have us, not only forbear making more slaves, but even manumit those we have."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, II, p. 517.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, II, pp. 518-519.

“But who is to indemnify their masters for the loss? Will the state do it? Is our treasury sufficient? Will the Erika do it? Can they do it? Or would they, to do what they think justice to the slaves, do a greater injustice to the owners? And if we set our slaves free, what is to be done with them? Few of them will return to their countries; they know too well the greater hardships they must there be subject to; they will not embrace our holy religion; they will not adopt our manners; our people will not pollute themselves by intermarrying with them. Must we maintain them as beggars in our streets, or suffer our properties to be the prey of their pillage? For men accustomed to slavery will not work for a livelihood when not compelled. And what is there so pitiable in their present condition? Were they not slaves in their own countries?

“Are not Spain, Portugal, France, and the Italian states governed by despots, who hold all their subjects in slavery, without exception? Even England treats its sailors as slaves; for they are, whenever the government pleases, seized, and confined in ships of war, condemned not only to work, but to fight, for small wages, or a mere subsistence, not better than our slaves are allowed by us. Is their condition then made worse by their falling into our hands? No; they have only exchanged one slavery for another and I may say a better; for here they are brought into a land where the sun of Islamism gives forth its light, and shines in full splendor, and they have an opportunity of making themselves acquainted with the true doctrine, and thereby saving their immortal souls. Those who remain at home have not that happiness. Sending the slaves home then would be sending them out of light into darkness.<sup>3</sup>

“I repeat the question, What is to be done with them? I have heard it suggested, that they may be planted in the wilderness, where there is plenty of land for them to subsist on, and where they may flourish as a free state; but they are, I doubt, too little disposed to labor without compulsion, as well as too ignorant to establish a good government, and the wild Arabs would soon molest and destroy or again enslave them. While serving us, we take care to provide them with everything, and they are treated with humanity. The laborers in their own country are, as I am well informed, worse fed, lodged, and clothed. The condition of most of them is therefore already mended, and requires no further improvement. Here their lives are in safety. They are not liable to be

<sup>3</sup> *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, II, pp. 519-520.

impressed for soldiers, and forced to cut one another's Christian throats, as in the wars of their own countries. If some of the religious mad bigots, who now tease us with their silly petitions, have in a fit of blind zeal freed their slaves, it was not generosity, it was not humanity, that moved them to the action; it was from the conscious burthen of a load of sins, and a hope, from the supposed merits of so good a work, to be excused from damnation.<sup>4</sup>

"How grossly are they mistaken to suppose slavery to be disallowed by the Alcoran! Are not the two precepts, to quote no more, '*Masters, treat your slaves with kindness; Slaves, serve your masters with cheerfulness and fidelity,*' clear proofs to the contrary? Nor can the plundering of infidels be in that sacred book forbidden, since it is well known from it, that God has given the world, and all that it contains, to his faithful Mussulmen, who are to enjoy it of right as fast as they conquer it. Let us then hear no more of this detestable proposition, the manumission of Christian slaves, the adoption of which would, by depreciating our lands, and houses, and thereby depriving so many good citizens of their properties, create universal discontent, and provoke insurrections, to the endangering of government and producing general confusion. I have therefore no doubt, but this wise council will prefer the comfort and happiness of a whole nation of true believers to the whim of a few *Erika*, and dismiss their petition."

The result was, as Martin tells us, that the Divan came to this resolution: "The doctrine, that plundering and enslaving the Christians is unjust, is at best *problematical*; but that it is the interest of this state to continue the practice, is clear; therefore let the petition be rejected."

And it was rejected accordingly.

And since like motives are apt to produce in the minds of men like opinions and resolutions, may we not, Mr. Brown, venture to predict, from this account, that the petitions to the Parliament of England for abolishing the slave-trade, to say nothing of other legislatures, and the debates upon them, will have a similar conclusion? I am, Sir, your constant reader and humble servant,

HISTORICUS.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, II, pp. 520-521.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 521.